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The Electoral Consequences of Marriage and Motherhood: How Gender Traits Influence Voter Evaluations of Female Candidates

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Recent literature largely dismisses the notion that voters engage in direct bias against women based on sex alone. Making a distinction between sex and gender, our theoretical expectations predict that female candidates who violate gender norms for marriage and motherhood will receive lower candidate evaluations, particularly so among voters who hold conservative beliefs about the proper role of women. We use a survey experiment to estimate the direct and conditional effects of gender traits and gender role beliefs on evaluations. Our results support the proposition that candidate traits, such as marital and parental status, can prime gender beliefs in the evaluative process.

KEYWORDS *female candidates, gender, gender roles, gender stereotypes, motherhood, voting*

As a democratic ideal, elected representatives should embody the diverse characteristics of the citizenry they represent. In practice, however, the pool of elected representatives in the United States is considerably less diverse than the constituents they serve. One of the most paradoxical aspects of democratic representation in the United States is the disproportionately low number of women legislators. Women represent more than 50 percent of the US adult population but only represent 18.5 percent of elected representatives in the federal government and 23.5 percent of elected representatives in statehouses (Center for American Women and Politics 2014). Beyond this,

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the political underrepresentation of women is not equal across industrialized democracies; it is particularly acute in the American setting.

Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the various aspects of gender and representation, and current received wisdom on this topic points heavily to institutional factors—the general lack of political party support and female-targeted recruitment—to explain the relative absence of women in the elected political sphere (Fox, Lawless, and Feely 2001; Lawless and Fox 2005; Lawless and Pearson 2008; Palmer and Simon 2006; Sanbonmatsu 2006). Fox and Lawless (2004, 2005) find that women are less likely to be recruited by parties to run for elective office and that they are also more likely to question their own qualifications at a much higher rate than men. They attribute this lack of confidence among potential female candidates to traditional gender socialization. While women are less likely to run than men, scholars also find that women are more likely to face competition in primary contests (Lawless and Pearson 2008). Despite this, women tend to win at rates equivalent to men. As noted by Kira Sanbonmatsu (2006), where women run, women win. From this perspective, echoed by many students of women and politics, women are not particularly disadvantaged in the electoral arena, but they are less likely to run for office than are men (but see Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). As such, voters do not engage in direct bias against women candidates, and were more women to run for office, levels of female representation would likely rise commensurately. This is not to say that voters may not rely on gender stereotypes when evaluating women candidates and that some voters may be more or less likely to support a woman candidate because of these stereotypical projections. On balance, however, political scientists seem to agree that few voters engage in overtly discriminatory voting behavior and that gender stereotypes do not universally disadvantage female candidates in the electoral marketplace (Burrell 1996; Dolan 2004, 2010; Ekstrand and Eckert 1981; King and Matland 2003; Sapiro 1981, 1982).

By and large, much of the research on women candidates has focused on the sex of the candidate, with little attention paid to gendered candidate traits that enhance or detract from women's attractiveness to the electorate. In this article we argue for a more nuanced analysis of gender and politics. In particular we focus on the candidate's status as a wife and mother and maintain that voters' individual beliefs about motherhood are factors that can powerfully affect their evaluations of female candidates. We argue that female candidates should not be conceived of as a blunt category and that sex is a biological distinction, whereas gender pertains to personal characteristics and behaviors that either conform to or violate broadly understood gender norms. All women are not the same, and candidate traits—particularly those that tap into predispositions about the proper role of women in the larger society—engender diverse, yet predictable responses from voters. Our theoretical perspective maintains that, aside from gender stereotypes that may influence candidate evaluations, individual gender beliefs can play an influential role in the evaluation of female candidates.

As recent research suggests, gender beliefs are multidimensional, encompassing predispositions pertaining to gender equality, gender empowerment, and the appropriate role of women (Bell 2010; Burns and Gallagher 2010). In this work we focus on the latter belief system, with the understanding that views on motherhood and women's roles are stable predispositions resulting from socialization and that they differ from policy views, issue opinions, and the like. As noted by Nancy Burns and Katherine Gallagher (2010),

Arguably the central component of public discussion about gender in the United States for the past hundred years has been whether women's place is in the home—whether women's primary, or even exclusive, responsibilities should lie in the private sphere of home and family. This conversation provides an enduring predisposition for thinking about gender issues (432).

Given the ongoing social significance of beliefs regarding women's roles and the relative importance of motherhood as a social norm, we argue that female candidates who defy traditional gender norms of marriage and motherhood are disadvantaged in the mass electorate, especially among voters who hold more traditional gender beliefs. From this perspective, the presence of a single, childless, female candidate primes core motherhood beliefs in the evaluative process. Adults who subscribe to conservative beliefs about women and motherhood will evaluate nontraditional female candidates more harshly than will those with progressive views. To test this proposition, we rely on a Polimetrix survey experiment that we designed and that was conducted in the fall of 2010 to estimate the direct and conditional effects of marriage, motherhood, and gender role beliefs on the evaluations of hypothetical female candidates for the US House of Representatives. We expect that individual-level beliefs about motherhood should have a powerful effect on female candidate evaluations, especially when a candidate violates gender norms and this violation is made salient.

GENDER BIAS IN CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS

It is not uncommon for voters to use various stereotypes when evaluating candidates. Stereotypes act as information shortcuts in complex political environments. Similar to how voters use party identification, voters also rely on various candidate background characteristics as heuristic devices (Popkin 1991; Stokes and Miller 1962), and considerable scholarship shows the impact of a candidate's sex, race, and religion on voters' assessment and support (Campbell, Green, and Layman 2010; Dolan 1998, 2004; Koch 2000; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

For women candidates, voters rely on stereotypes to make inferences about candidates' positions on issues, ideological orientations, and performance in office (Dolan 1998; Koch 2000; Leeper 1991; Sanbonmatsu 2002; but see Hayes (2011) for a contrary evidence). Voters also assume female candidates are more liberal than male candidates. Women are also perceived as being more capable at handling "compassion" issues (e.g., poverty, child care, and health care), whereas male candidates are assumed to be stronger in dealing with issues regarding defense and foreign policy (Alexander and Anderson 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Koch 1999).

Beyond the influences of general sex stereotypes, additional research recognizes that the application of sex stereotypes is often conditioned by the candidate's party affiliation (Dolan 2010; King and Matland 2003; Koch 2000; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). Koch (2000) found that gender stereotypes associated with Democratic female candidates increase the perceived ideological distance between female candidates and the average voter, whereas gender stereotypes actually decrease the perceived ideological distance between Republican female candidates and most voters. King and Matland (2003), however, found that Republican women are often seen as more ideologically liberal than Republican men, potentially disadvantaging them in primary elections. More recently, Hayes (2011) found that party stereotypes overshadow gender stereotypes, suggesting that as party polarization increases, gender stereotypes may be rendered inconsequential when candidates are associated with political parties.

Despite conflicting views regarding the influence that gender stereotypes play in the electoral arena, academic consensus among political scientists generally reports that *direct* gender bias plays little to no role in relative levels of support for female candidates (Burrell 1996; Chaney and Sinclair 1994; Ekstrand and Eckert 1981; King and Matland 2003; Sapiro 1981, 1982). Voters are not systematically attracted to or repelled by female candidates simply as a result of their sex. Scholars cite the relatively equal electoral success rates between men and women as evidence against direct bias. Additional support for this proposition is often drawn from public opinion trends over time. According to public opinion time series data from the Gallup Poll, the General Social Survey, and the American National Election Studies, the percentage of Americans willing to vote for a qualified female president has increased substantially over time from a low of 33 percent in the 1940s to a contemporary high exceeding 90 percent (Streb et al. 2008). While much of the literature tends to dismiss explicit voter bias when it comes to candidate sex, some scholars contend that social desirability effects and, in some cases, bad samples, hamper this strong conclusion (Fox and Smith 1998; Streb et al. 2008).

Despite the methodological concerns over traditional survey research questions, most scholars conducting research on bias against female candidates assume minimal *direct* effects based on candidate sex, and, as such, the majority of attitudinal research has focused on the indirect influences that sex stereotypes may play in the process of candidate choice. Above all, previous work on voter bias tacitly assumes that direct bias—were it to occur—would be a response to candidate “sex.” In large part, however, this literature fails to give adequate consideration to gender. As Kathleen Dolan (2004) points out in *Voting for Women: How the Public Evaluates Women Candidates*:

... we must also consider the differences between the terms sex and gender. While these terms are often used interchangeably, I would argue that doing so conflates two different considerations. While sex refers to biological distinctions between female and male, gender is a more complex and socially constructed reference to the categories “feminine” and “masculine.” Gender involves ideas about the behaviors, roles, and activities that are considered feminine and masculine as well as beliefs about which people (women or men) appropriately occupy those spaces (7).

The implication of Dolan’s distinction is that it would be wrong to assume that all women candidates are created equal with regard to *gender*. To the extent that gendered evaluations are imbued with expectations about appropriate gender behaviors, candidate behaviors and traits that violate these norms may result in gender bias from voters. Citizens may not have knee jerk reactions to candidates based on sex alone, but should candidates violate important gender norms in the society, voters may punish candidates for these violations in very direct ways. As noted in the social psychology literature, stereotypes of generic women are very warm, as in the absence of more specific gender trait information “women” tend to be conflated with “housewives” (Fiske et al. 2002; Haddock and Zanna 1994). These findings suggest that marriage and motherhood constitute widely held gender norms for women. Furthermore, gender research based on expectancy violation theory finds that women who deviate from cultural stereotypes may be subject to popular backlash, especially among those who perceive nontraditional women as a threat to individual self-esteem or group opportunities (Beirnat, Vescio, and Billings 1999; Rudman and Fairchild 2004). Applying these insights to the realm of politics, we expect candidate traits that bear on gender norms have the potential to affect political decision making and evaluations. More specifically, how a female candidate presents herself for gendered lifestyle choices—marriage, children, and career—provides voters with information regarding the extent to which she affirms or violates cultural gender norms.

MOTHERHOOD AND THE MOMMY WARS

Feminist scholars have grappled with the subject of motherhood and family for decades. From feminist cries of oppressive pronatalism to antifeminist accusations that political liberalism is destroying the family, the often heated debate over the role of motherhood has clearly become part of the political landscape. Popularized as “the mommy wars,” disagreements over notions of motherhood and the appropriate role of women in US society are a significant component of the cultural divide embodied in contemporary politics (Kaufmann 2002; Legee et al. 2002).

The “mommy wars” are about more than scuffles over the merits of having children versus not having children or working mothers versus stay-at-home moms; rather, they invoke questions regarding women’s social identities and the relative importance placed on motherhood in the larger society. Wilcox (1991), for example, found that while participation in the workforce usually leads to more egalitarian views regarding female gender roles, this was not the case for Evangelical women. Wilcox (1991) attributed this finding to Evangelical women’s strong social identifications as homemakers. This research strongly suggests that marriage and motherhood are normative in a way that careerism is not, especially for those individuals who hold traditional beliefs about family structure, whether or not they adhere to these traditional standards in their own private lives. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect that a female candidate who (although technically working) can still present herself in such a way that it does not violate traditional gender norms.

In *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Kristin Luker (1984) makes the argument that the debate over abortion is driven by views on when life begins and how to view the fetus, but also, for women, it very much taps into an ongoing debate over the importance of motherhood in one’s identity. “Women who oppose abortion and wish to make it officially unavailable, are declaring both practically and symbolically, that women’s reproductive roles should be given social primacy . . . the act of conception therefore creates a pregnant woman; rather than a woman who is pregnant” (Luker 1984, 200). Thus, a woman who has chosen not to marry and have children may violate prevailing gender norms, not only about family but about womanhood as well. As Luker (1984) points out, the more women succeed in the male sphere and opt out of motherhood, the more the “social primacy” of motherhood takes a hit; therefore, a single female candidate with no children may be seen as a threat to the identity and values of some men and women.

This norm-based perspective on the political advantages of motherhood is not universally shared. Many scholars maintain that being a mother works to the detriment of women in the electoral sphere, especially among mothers with young children. As Stalsburg (2010) argues, “Although some political candidates may successfully run and serve as political ‘moms’, such

a presentation may handicap others, however. A long-standing body of research shows that female candidates, especially those vying for top political positions, may need to emphasize their ‘masculine’ traits and obscure telltale signs of their femininity, including their roles as wives and mothers” (374). Our response to both strains of thought in the literature points to individual gender predispositions as a factor that mediates voter responses to female candidates and motherhood.

In this article we argue that the marital and motherhood status of female candidates can prime gender beliefs during the candidate evaluation process, particularly so when candidates violate conventional gender expectations. The psychological process that brings gender predispositions to bear on candidate judgments is similar to that described in the racial priming literature (e.g., see Kaufmann 2004; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). In African American candidates, candidate race primes racial predispositions and makes racial beliefs more accessible to candidate evaluations. Individual gender traits operate similarly to racial characteristics in that they can prime potent gender stereotypes. From the perspective of expectancy violation theory, nontraditional women candidates should prime gender beliefs to a greater extent than more traditional women, because counter-stereotypic behavior stimulates negative judgments (Rudman and Fairchild 2004). Given this finding, we suspect that female candidates who embody traditional gender roles—married mothers—are less likely to prime gender beliefs as evaluative considerations. The vast majority of adult women in the United States are or will be mothers over the course of their lifetime.¹ Thus, the mention that a female candidate is married with children conforms to American social customs and is consistent with gender expectations. In general, when there is consistency between gender expectations and female candidate traits, there is no ready stimulus to prime gender role beliefs. It is certainly possible that voters may question whether candidates who are mothers with children at home will be able to pay sufficient attention to their dual responsibilities, and, anecdotally, we know that these issues are raised in some contests. There is no systematic empirical evidence, however, to support the proposition that motherhood, in general, disadvantages female candidates, or that female candidates with young children are regularly punished at the polls. Finally, it is important to consider the fact that Americans who hold progressive predispositions toward gender roles do not necessarily harbor animosity toward marriage and motherhood. Everyone, even the most liberal voter, has or has had a mother. Being pro-women’s rights does not automatically evoke aversion toward mothers, especially in the case of working mothers such as political candidates.

Social psychology research adds additional credence to this argument. According to the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), warmth and competency are primary dimensions of out-group stereotypes. For gender stereotypes, SCM research finds that traditional women are consistently rated high on

warmth and low on competence, whereas professional women and feminists are rated high on competence and low on warmth (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2004; Fiske et al. 2002; Fiske, Xu, and Cuddy 1999). In this study we vary the extent to which our hypothetical candidate exhibits traditional gender traits and expect that, all else equal, married women with children should be perceived more warmly than single, unmarried women, especially among voters who subscribe to traditional gender role beliefs.

Given the theoretical proposition that female candidates who violate traditional gender role norms prime motherhood beliefs in the evaluative process, we offer the following hypotheses:

- H₁: When female candidates violate gender role norms and voters are aware of this violation, motherhood beliefs become salient in the evaluative process.
- H₂: When female candidates violate gender role norms and this violation is made salient, voters with conservative motherhood beliefs will be less approving than voters who hold progressive beliefs.
- H₃: Female candidates who conform to traditional gender roles (e.g., married mothers) will not typically prime motherhood beliefs as a consideration in the evaluative process.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

To test these hypotheses, we designed and conducted a survey experiment through the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), an online national stratified survey conducted by Polimetrix/YouGov. The University of Maryland survey module included 1,000 total respondents and was conducted in two waves. The preelection wave was administered prior to the 2010 election during three time periods: late September, the middle of October, and late October.² The postelection wave was administered immediately following the 2010 elections. The experiment that forms the basis for this study included 330 respondents and was designed to isolate the effects of motherhood status on support for hypothetical female candidates while estimating the conditioning effects of motherhood beliefs.

The preelection survey asked respondents two questions dealing with motherhood and the evolving nature of the family. The first question posed the following: "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever and the woman takes care of the home and family."³ The second question read: "Working mothers can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with their children as a mother who does not work." In both cases, respondents were then asked whether they agreed, disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed. We created the "Motherhood Beliefs" measure by constructing an additive index of these questions that ranges from 0 to 4.

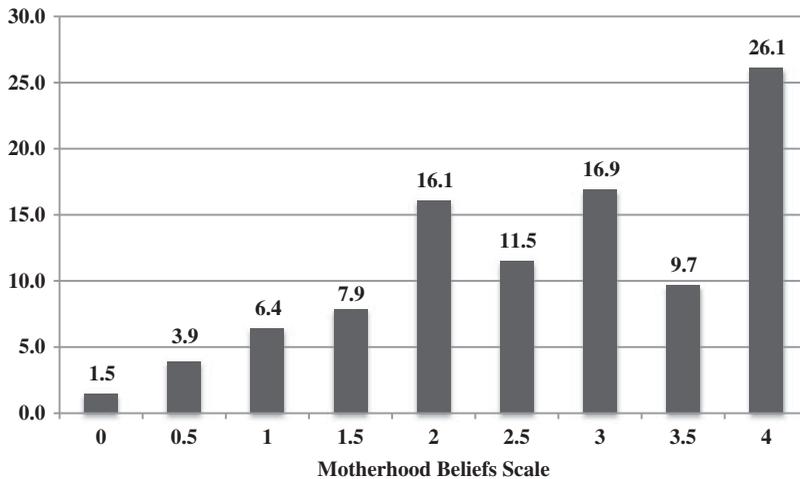


FIGURE 1 Distribution of Motherhood Beliefs.

Note. Data labels are the percentage of the sample who score in the respective category. Motherhood Beliefs scale is scored from conservative to liberal. $N = 330$.

Source. Ansolabehere (2010) and Bell (2010).

The distribution of the Motherhood Beliefs Measure is presented in [Figure 1](#). As evident from the distribution, beliefs are somewhat skewed toward the liberal end of the scale. Approximately half of the sample scored below 3, with the other half scoring 3 and above.

The experimental manipulation was administered after the 2010 election with anywhere from one to eight weeks between surveys (depending on when the respondent was administered the first wave). In the postelection wave of the survey, respondents received a description of a hypothetical female congressional candidate and were asked to evaluate the candidate using a feeling thermometer format (see [Table 1](#)). The experiment included two treatment conditions and a control group. The first treatment describes a female candidate who is a successful businesswoman, and it explicitly mentions that she is married with children. The second treatment describes the same successful businesswoman, but it explicitly mentions that she is not married, has no children, and is devoted to her work. In the control group, the baseline candidate description is the same as those in the treatments, but there is no mention of the candidate's marital or motherhood status. After reading the candidate descriptions in the postelection survey, respondents were then instructed: "We'd like to get your feelings toward Amy Smith. Please rate her on something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward her. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean

TABLE 1 Wording of Treatment and Control Condition

Treatment A	Amy Smith, a candidate for the US House of Representatives, is a successful businesswoman. Amy graduated cum laude from a top university with a degree in business and politics. She is happily married and has three children. Amy was elected five years ago to serve on the city council. She is moderate politically and has worked with people from both parties.
Treatment B	Amy Smith, a candidate for the US House of Representatives, is a successful businesswoman. Amy graduated cum laude from a top university with a degree in business and politics. She is not married, has no children, and is devoted to her work. Amy was elected five years ago to serve on the city council. She is moderate politically and has worked with people from both parties.
Control	Amy Smith, a candidate for the US House of Representatives, is a successful businesswoman. Amy graduated cum laude from a top university with a degree in business and politics. Amy was elected five years ago to serve on the city council. She is moderate politically and has worked with people from both parties.

that you don't care much for her. Ratings of 50 mean that you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward her."

With the exception of the experimental manipulation, the candidate description in all three conditions presents a qualified candidate who is politically moderate without mention of her party affiliation or issue stance. Because there was a minimum time period of at least one week between the two phases of the survey, we are confident that the first phase, which measured gender beliefs, did not exert any influence over the second phase. It is also worth mentioning that the two questions in phase 1 were part of a much longer survey that asked a wide variety of political questions; thus, the motherhood belief questions were unlikely to retain their salience over time.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To explore the influence of gender characteristics and beliefs about motherhood on the evaluation of female candidates, we derive estimates from an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model. The dependent variable in the model is the candidate thermometer score, which ranges from 0 to 100.⁴ The primary explanatory variables include dummy variables for Treatment A and Treatment B with the treatment condition coded "1" and the control group coded "0." We also include a Motherhood Beliefs measure that ranges from 0 to 4, conservative to liberal. Treatment A includes 98 respondents, treatment B includes 117 respondents, and the control group has 116 respondents. To estimate the direct and conditional effects of these factors, we estimate the following model:

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{Candidate Rating} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Treatment A} \\
& + \beta_2 (\text{Treatment A} * \text{Motherhood Beliefs}) \\
& + \beta_3 \text{Treatment B} + \beta_4 (\text{Treatment B} * \text{Motherhood Beliefs}) \\
& + \beta_5 \text{Motherhood Beliefs} \\
& + \beta_{1...x} \text{Relevant Control Factors} + \varepsilon.
\end{aligned}$$

Our expectations are that Treatment B—the description of the female candidate as unmarried with no children—will exert a negative effect on candidate evaluations vis-à-vis the control group (H_1) and that the interaction term (Treatment B* Motherhood Beliefs) will be positive and significant, indicating that voters with progressive motherhood beliefs are more positive in their evaluations than are those with conservative beliefs (H_2). Finally, we expect that the coefficients for Treatment A and the corresponding interaction term will be statistically insignificant, suggesting that when gender traits are consistent with gender role norms, they do not act as a prime for motherhood beliefs (H_3).

In addition to the primary variables of interest, we also include a set of measures to control for any sample differences and to ensure that our results are robust after the introduction of demographic and political characteristics that might otherwise influence candidate evaluations. Our control variables include age, gender, education, family income, party identification, ideology, race, and religious traditionalism. (See the Appendix for the exact coding of control variables.)

The findings from the OLS model are found in [Table 2](#). The model in [Table 2](#) estimates the effect of Treatment A (candidate is married with children), Treatment B (candidate is not married and has no children), and the conditioning effect of Motherhood Beliefs on both treatments.

The results from [Table 2](#) provide substantial support for our expectations. When our hypothetical candidate, Amy Smith, is described as married with children, her overall evaluations do not significantly differ from those in the control group. Mothers as candidates do not appear to suffer from gender bias, because motherhood status, in this instance, does not prime Motherhood Beliefs as part of the evaluative calculus. Contrast these results, however, with those from Treatment B, and it is clear that single, childless women suffer from significant gender bias in their evaluations as candidates. The coefficients for the treatment and the interaction terms are statistically significant, substantively large, and in the predicted directions.⁵ These results are best understood by the graph in [Figure 2](#).

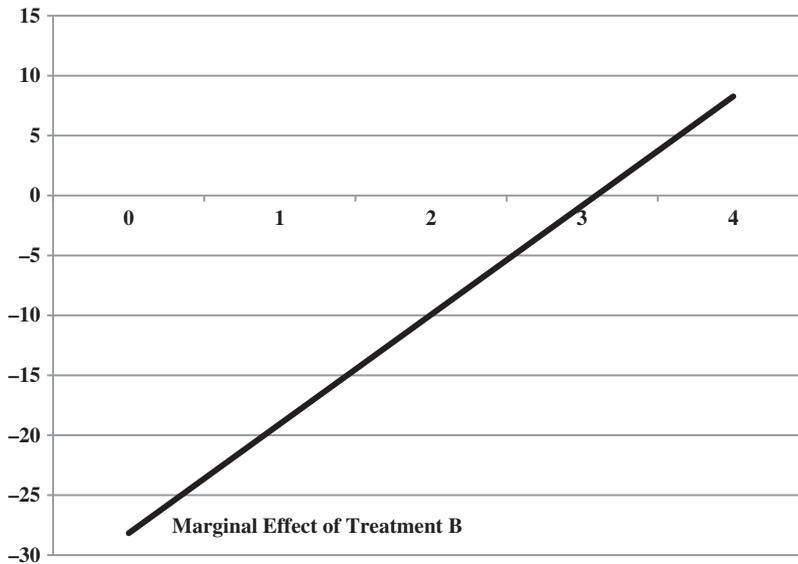
[Figure 2](#) uses the regression coefficients from [Table 2](#) to plot the marginal effects of Treatment B across the range of the Motherhood Beliefs

TABLE 2 OLS Regression Results—Predicting Female Candidate Evaluations (0 to 100)

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Robust Standard Errors	P Value
Treatment A*Motherhood	1.15	4.12	0.781
Motherhood Beliefs	-1.03	3.00	0.732
Treatment A	-5.41	12.53	0.666
Treatment B* Motherhood	9.11	4.03	0.025
Treatment B	-28.17	12.16	0.022
Age	0.174	0.102	0.089
Educational Attainment	0.047	1.43	0.974
Family Income	0.088	0.500	0.860
Sex (female)	-2.32	4.19	0.580
Party Identification	-0.258	1.13	0.821
Ideology	-2.65	2.20	0.229
Race	4.28	6.73	0.525
Religious Traditionalism	0.090	1.32	0.946
Constant	61.0	16.9	0.000
			$N = 221$
			$R^2 = 0.085$

Note. Dependent variable is the feeling thermometer score for the hypothetical candidate (0 to 100). Sample includes respondents from Treatment A, Treatment B, and the control group.

Source. Ansolabehere (2010) and Bell (2010).

**FIGURE 2** Marginal Effects of Treatment B on Candidate Evaluations by Motherhood Beliefs.

Note. The predicted marginal effect of Treatment B as conditioned by Motherhood Beliefs (0 to 4) was estimated by using the regression results from Table 2. The line represents the difference between the thermometer scores given to the single, childless candidate versus those from the control group as one moves from low (conservative) to high (liberal) on the Motherhood Beliefs scale.

scale. The marginal effect represents the difference between the treatment and control groups with the control group set at “0.” As is clear from [Figure 2](#), the single, female candidate with no children receives dramatically lower evaluations than the female candidate in the control group among adults who hold conservative beliefs about motherhood and the family. For those who scored a 0 on the Motherhood Beliefs scale (the most conservative), their evaluations are on average 28 points lower than the control group average of 61. Indeed, it is not until one scores a 3 on the 0 to 4 Motherhood Beliefs scale that the treatment B evaluations equal those in the control group. Given the fact that 47 percent of the total sample scored below 3 on the scale, this suggests that approximately one-half of American adults may evaluate a female candidate more negatively if they know that she is single and childless. These findings strongly indicate that gender bias may indeed exist, but that it is, in part, a function of whether or not female candidates conform to gender norms, with motherhood being an important one. Our results provide no evidence that the public feels particular aversion toward women who are mothers, but it appears to be a much different story for those who are not.

Consistent with our priming expectations, those who scored at the most liberal end of the Motherhood Beliefs scale are actually more positive about the Treatment B candidate than were those in the control group. Apparently, for men and women who hold the most progressive gender role beliefs, being single and childless is perceived as an asset as opposed to a liability. Respondents with the most progressive gender role beliefs are approximately eight points more positive than the control group. On balance, our analyses confirm our theoretical expectations. Gender role beliefs only play a role in candidate evaluations when a candidate violates gender norms and when these facts are salient to voters.

Taking guidance from the extant literature regarding the conditioning influence of party identification on gender stereotypes, we estimated an identical model to that in [Table 2](#), using party identification X the treatment condition as the interaction term. (Results are not shown but are available from the authors.) Unlike the robust findings for the influence of motherhood beliefs on candidate evaluations in the Treatment B group, the party identification analysis yielded null results. Gender belief progressives were more likely to favor nontraditional female candidates than gender belief conservatives, even when controlling for partisanship. Republicans, however, were no more likely than Democrats to punish female candidates who violated gender norms, once we controlled for motherhood beliefs. We also tested for the conditioning effects of respondent sex, but this also resulted in null findings. As we maintain in H_1 , candidate traits that violate traditional family values, such as marriage and motherhood, prime beliefs about motherhood as

evaluative considerations, and our null findings in these supplemental analyses suggest that this priming effect is also evident across party attachments and across the sexes.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this survey experiment yield important and new perspectives on women as political candidates. First, single women without children appear to be disadvantaged in the electoral arena. This should be particularly true in legislative districts or states that house disproportionately high numbers of conservative voters who hold traditional predispositions regarding gender roles. Sanbonmatsu and Dolan (2009) have speculated that the relatively equal rates of victory between male and female candidates may not really be evidence against gender bias but may be a function of the fact that women tend to run in districts where they think they can win. From this perspective, the conventional wisdom that direct bias based on candidate sex does not exist may not take the endogeneity of where women run into account. This article lends some support to their suspicions. Women in general—and particular kinds of women—may not choose to run or be encouraged to run in districts where their lifestyle choices do not conform to constituent values. The notion that direct gender bias is inconsequential should be revisited in light of these findings. All women are not created equal, and there are good reasons to move beyond candidate sex by focusing on gendered candidate traits as potential obstacles for female representation. Gender stereotypes may play a role in how voters perceive female candidates, but research on gender bias should expand to include a greater focus on gender predispositions as they interact with various candidate traits.

Despite our robust experimental findings, we acknowledge that our experimental manipulation was less than ideal. The language in Treatment B included a mention that the candidate was “devoted to her work,” whereas this language was absent in the other two conditions. To disregard the robust findings we find in this study, however, one would need to believe that it was the candidate’s devotion to her work (as opposed to her motherhood status) that was driving the observed effect. In a hypothetical congressional candidate, there is no logical reason to assume that voters would be repelled by a candidate described as hard working because, presumably, most voters expect their representatives to be so. Given the low likelihood that devotion to one’s work is driving our findings in the Treatment B condition and given the very robust effects we identify in this study, we feel confident that the experimental results are internally valid.

Finally, we also recognize that we do not control for many of the factors present in actual political contests. One consideration, in particular, that we do not explore in this research is the role that candidate party identification

may play in either enhancing or mitigating the influence of gender traits and motherhood beliefs. Our experiment purposely excluded party labels so that we might isolate the influence of motherhood status without the confounding influence of party. We acknowledge, however, that once party identification is entered into the equation, some of the bias we detect in this research likely will be mitigated by party loyalties.

As many politicians begin their careers in local politics, and as approximately 80 percent of local elections are nonpartisan (Kaufmann 2004), our results suggest that single, unmarried female candidates who run in nonpartisan contests may be particularly disadvantaged. The extent of this disadvantage, however, is most certainly tied to the salience of the candidate's motherhood status. In low salience elections, such as state legislative races and city council contests, many voters have little personal information regarding the candidates on the ballot. Even so, the potential for childless women to be disadvantaged in "entry level" political contests means that gender bias, when it occurs, can affect overall levels of women's representation well beyond local and state governments. In addition, the magnitude of our findings in the Treatment B scenario points to the possibility that gender beliefs may retain some of their influence on candidate assessments even in a partisan context, although we cannot be sure. At a minimum, gender bias of the type we identify has the potential to disadvantage nontraditional female candidates in party primaries, possibly dampen the intensity of voter preferences in general elections, and create impediments to fundraising and mobilization efforts in both. The aforementioned negative consequences that may result from gender bias against nontraditional female candidates are significant, whether or not party loyalties constrain individual vote choice in partisan, general elections. Additional research taking party identification, opposition candidate trait characteristics, issue positions, and male candidates into account should be conducted to fully understand how gender beliefs operate in the context of partisan politics.

CONCLUSION

When 2010 congressional candidate Krystal Marie Ball (VA-1) first began to seek out the advice from advisors within the campaign world, she was told, "Krystal, I've got two pieces of advice for you: Cut your hair and stop talking about your kid. No one cares" (as reported in a September 2010 newsletter from the Ball campaign). While some female candidates have been advised to play down certain feminine characteristics—in this case motherhood—others have played them up. The "grizzly mom" slogan remains popular among some Republican women, and Senator Patty Murray made a lasting impression with her "mom in tennis shoes" campaign. Political advisors, more so than political scientists, have long been conscious of image

management issues related to female candidates. Motherhood is good, but as Ball's advisors made quite clear, you can have too much of a good thing. For single women, advisors appear more leery. Middle-aged female politicians who are unmarried and childless run the risk (in some places) that voters will perceive them as lesbians and react to them unfavorably. Fear over anti-gay backlash has led political figures like Janet Reno and Janet Napolitano to publicly refute lesbian rumors. Beyond this, there seems to be a sense among political insiders that single women, generally, have a tougher path in the electoral realm. As told by Ann Kornblut (2010) regarding Napolitano,

When she was picked to head Homeland Security, Napolitano was the subject of a controversial remark by Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, who said she was 'perfect for the job. Because for that job you have to have no life. Janet has no family. Perfect. She can literally devote nineteen to twenty hours a day for it' Rendell, a Democrat, said. He later apologized—and insisted he would have said the same of a man with no family, and that he himself is a workaholic—but the comment itself was a reminder how prominent the role Napolitano's status of a single woman is. Would that status affect Napolitano's long term-prospects? An informal survey of Democrats suggests they are divided, with some quietly saying being single would hurt her if she decided to run for president and others disagreeing, saying it would eliminate questions about problematic husbands and children who aren't being adequately raised, that other women have faced (152).

Our findings suggest that political insiders seem to be onto something. Motherhood, as a candidate trait, does not necessarily come with natural liabilities, and, played right, perhaps it can even be an advantage—depending on the audience. Single and childless women are rarely advantaged, however, and our experimental results suggest that gender role conservatives—and even moderates—are negatively disposed toward women who do not marry and have children. To the extent that this perception is operating in political circles, it poses yet one more institutional obstacle to the recruitment and empowerment of women in politics. It also provides compelling evidence that direct gender bias is clearly possible in electoral politics.

NOTES

1. According to Pew Research Center Report released in 2010, slightly more than 80 percent of American women have at least one child over their lifetimes (Pew Research Center 2010).

2. The 330 respondents we rely on in this research were a subset of the total sample who were asked and responded to the relevant questions in both waves of the survey.

3. The order of the questions in the survey experiment was randomly assigned. A comparison of treatment group demographic and political characteristics is presented in Appendix Table 1.

4. The distribution of the dependent variable is continuous from a low score of 20 to a high score of 100, with the modal response at 50. Given the continuous nature of the variable, Ordinary Least Squares regression is the most appropriate estimation technique.

5. Given that this is an experimental research design, our primary analytical concerns pertain to the significance (or lack thereof) of the interaction effects between Motherhood Beliefs and the gender traits of the hypothetical candidates. The R^2 values for the models may seem low by conventional standards, but because we are not attempting to fully specify a candidate evaluation model, we had no expectations that they would particularly high and consider them appropriate for this experimental analysis.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Comparison of Demographic and Political Characteristics

	Age	Party Identification	Race	Sex	Religious Traditionalism	Ideology	Education
Treatment Group A	52.7	3.02	0.78	0.62	2.93	2.31	2.70*
Control Group	52.1	2.9	0.79	0.58	2.95	2.29	2.98
Treatment Group B	50	3.35*	0.85	0.54	3.06	2.16	2.94

Note. Cell entries are category means. *Significant difference between treatment and control means $p < 0.05$.

Coding and Question Wording for Independent Variables

Motherhood Beliefs

Additive Index (Higher values are more progressive)

A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.

0-Disagree, 1-Neither Agree or Disagree, 2-Agree

It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever and the woman takes care of the home and family.

0-Agree, 1-Neither Agree or Disagree, 2-Disagree

Race White = 1, Other = 0

Age Actual value in years

Party ID 0 = Strong Republican, 1 = Republican, 2 = Leaning Republican, 3 = Independent, 4 = Leaning Democrat, 5 = Democrat, 6 = Strong Democrat

Ideology 0 = Extremely Conservative, 1 = Conservative, 2 = Slightly Conservative, 3 = Moderate (Middle of the Road), 4 = Slightly Liberal, 5 = Liberal, 6 = Extremely Liberal

Sex 1 = Female, 0 = Male

Family Income 1 = None or less than \$2,999
 2 = \$3,000 - \$4,999
 3 = \$5,000 - \$7,499
 4 = \$7,500 - \$9,999
 5 = \$10,000 - \$10,999
 6 = \$11,000 - \$12,499
 7 = \$12,500 - \$14,999
 8 = \$15,000 - \$16,999
 9 = \$17,000 - \$19,999
 10 = \$20,000 - \$21,999
 11 = \$22,000 - \$24,999
 12 = \$25,000 - \$29,999
 13 = \$30,000 - \$34,999
 14 = \$35,000 - \$39,999

- 15 = \$40,000-\$44,999
 16 = \$45,000-\$49,999
 17 = \$50,000-\$59,999
 18 = \$60,000-\$74,999
 19 = \$75,000-\$89,999
 20 = \$90,000-\$99,999
 21 = \$100,000-\$109,999
 22 = \$110,000-\$119,999
 23 = \$120,000-\$134,999
 24 = \$135,000-\$149,999
 25 = \$150,000 and over

Religious Traditionalism

Additive Index (Low to High)

People practice their religion in different ways. Outside of attending religious services, how often do you pray?

0 = Never, 1 = Seldom, 2 = A few times a month, 3 = Once a week, 4 = A few times a week, 5 = A few times a month, 6 = Once a week, 7 = Once a day, 8 = Several times a day

How important is religion in your life?

0 = Not at all important, 1 = Not too important, 2 = Somewhat important, 3 = Very important

Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?

0 = Never, 1 = Seldom, 2 = A few times a month, 3 = Once a week, 4 = A few times a week, 5 = A few times a month, 6 = Once a week, 7 = more than once a week

Education

0 = no high school, 1 = high school graduate, 2 = some college/no degree, 3 = AA degree, 4 = BA, 5 = MA, 6 = MA and Higher